

Positively 4<sup>th</sup> Street  
The Lives and Times of  
Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Mimi Baez Fariña and Richard Fariña  
David Hadju  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001

reviewed by Peter Stone Brown

“A Simple Twist of Fate” might have been a more appropriate title for this book which is essentially a biography of Richard Fariña in disguise. But it is more than that. As entwined as any Dylan epic song, it is a look at crazy poet hustler conmen conniving their way to the top; a behind-the-scenes glimpse at the folk scene of the '60s; a tale of four lovers a rivalry of two sisters, and a competition of two writers.

Richard Fariña in a sense was the embodiment of the '60s. Undeniably brilliant, a creative explosion waiting to happen, he was a mythmaker supreme, a charmer beyond compare and a master manipulator. In reality, a kid from Flatbush, Brooklyn, of Cuban/Irish descent, he had people believing he was a gun runner for the IRA and fought in the hills with Castro. The parallels with his Hibbing, Minnesota counterpart, whose stories of running away from home, working in carnivals and hanging with blues singers are clear. All this would be somewhat laughable except as an artist Fariña delivered the goods. With less than 20 songs, he established himself as a major songwriter, pretty much blowing away all the other folkie songwriters from Greenwich Village, and showing himself to be the only one working on the same poetic level as Dylan.

This book begins with the sheltered childhood of Joan Baez and her younger sister Mimi, telling us more than we want or need to know. Structured almost like a play, various characters are introduced, some peripheral, some not. For some mysterious reason Hadju feels the need to describe in detail not only every residence Baez lived in but every room mentioned in the book. The only time it really works is when Fariña and Eric Von Schmidt, broke and scuffling are crashing at an opulent residence in London complete with an invisible butler. This attention to detail is extended to what people wore (that Fariña liked his jeans dry-cleaned is mentioned often) and what brand of guitars they played. The last is rather humorous because Hadju gets it wrong, referring several times to Baez's Gibson and Dylan's Martin, when it was Baez who played a Martin and Dylan who played a Gibson.

More interesting are the almost incidental glances into the business side of the '60s folk scene. The blundering by musicians, managers and record company executives is comical and sad, especially considering that the "folk community" then (and now) prides itself on not being interested in business. This is not presented as gossip or dirt, but as what went down. Baez turning down Columbia Records for the low-key Vanguard, picking the more ethical Manny Greenhill to manage her, but after she had the far more business-minded Albert Grossman negotiate her contract.

In a sense this book is about three hustlers who would do whatever they had to for fame and success with Mimi Fariña emerging as heroine/victim. She was just 17 and still in high school when Fariña at his romantic poet rebel best courted and secretly married her in France.

Baez was more reserved in her hustling, but the description of her debut at the 1959 Newport Folk Festival shows she was no slouch in the getting noticed department.

Not surprisingly, Dylan comes off as elusive. While he probably was every bit as manipulative as Fariña, like a true Mafia Don, he didn't get caught. Throughout the book he appears and disappears saying very little with the exception of a rather vicious attack on virtually every other songwriter near the book's conclusion. As Mitch Greenhill comments, "Dick was like 'Look at me—here I am. Dig Me!' Dylan was like, 'Look all you want you'll never see me.'"

As interesting as the four main characters are, drama and emotion are missing. And Hadju is sometimes confusing. Describing Martin Carthy and Dylan spending New Year's Eve at a London club, he has Dylan stopping singing "Auld Lang Syne" after the first line of the song, while Carthy wonders why Dylan stopped singing. In the very next paragraph, Hadju writes: "While Dylan and Martin Carthy were bellowing 'Auld Lang Syne' Eric Von Schmidt was celebrating with a miniature bottle of bourbon on a BOAC flight to London." So was Dylan standing silent during the celebration or bellowing? A proofreader should've caught this.

While Hadju succeeds in portraying Fariña as a domineering, control freak who somehow charmed almost everyone he met into loving him while not necessarily trusting him, the reader is left ambivalent. What should be the book's great dramatic and tragic moment, Fariña's death in a motorcycle crash on the day his novel, *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*, was published as well as Mimi's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday,

he leaves you feeling like gee, that's too bad, despite building up to it carefully.

Hadju is at his best when following Fariña's death he writes, "Who reveled in the act of living more than this man who tried to make every meal a banquet, every task a mission, every conversation a play, every gathering a party?"

There's a great story here. Unlike many biographies, most of the accounts are believable. But somehow, Hadju while showing insight and making the right connections fails to make this book come alive.